

# 1926: Wet and wild Prohibition days

By JON BLACKWELL / Staff Writer <http://www.capitalcentury.com/1926.html>

Just how hard was it to enforce Prohibition in the Trenton of the '20s? Pretty hard, considering that the police chief gave his personal protection to bootleggers and threatened to arrest a dry agent who came to town to disturb things.

Just how easy was it to have a drink in the Trenton of the '20s? As easy as walking into the darkened speakeasies that dotted Chambersburg and South Broad Street, and State Street. As easy as driving to the Jersey Shore, where cases of whiskey were being unloaded in open air markets at pre Prohibition prices.

A shocking state of affairs, the good forces of temperance and decency agreed. They demanded that the United States government crack down on the illicit alcohol trade, since local authorities were clearly not up to the job and city after city was flowing in booze.

In the fall of 1926, a ramrod-straight, tee totaling Army colonel named Ira Reeves showed up to take charge of the federal government's New Jersey district for Prohibition, with headquarters in Newark.

Reeves thought of himself as a "Prohibition St. Patrick" chasing the snakes of demon rum out of New Jersey, and went to work with a vengeance, raiding several booze plants a day.

It took him less than a year to figure out that he was failing -- that he had, in fact, the most impossible job in the world. Keep Jersey sober? Might as well ask Jersey drivers to obey the speed limit.

"There were just as many bootleggers, making bigger profits than before," Reeves would later write. "There were doubtless just as many wildcat stills, cutting plants, breweries, ale plants, roadhouses, saloons and speakeasies as before my ambitious crusade."

"I then realized what all the other administrators in the United States had learned - the Prohibition laws are unenforceable."

The forces on both sides of Prohibition -- "drys" in favor, "wets" against - were arrayed against each other long before the '20s. The Women's Christian Temperance Union had been storming against the evils of drink since the 1870s, with broad support from the Protestant church.

The pastor of the Clinton Avenue Baptist Church voiced the WCTU's sentiments in 1891 when he called drink "the nursery of crime, the enemy of domestic happiness, the threshold of the poorhouse, the vestibule of the jail, the portal of hell."

New Jersey, however, was a wet state, and the capital city of Trenton was a melting pot of

Italians, Irish, Germans and Poles. They cherished their Old World traditions, traditions that included a lot of social drinking.

Besides, urban sophisticates saw Prohibition as a monstrous joke imposed on them by narrow minded hypocrites. As H.L. Mencken put it, "Prohibition has little behind it, philosophically speaking, other than the resentment of the country lout for the city man."

The governor elected in 1919, Edward Edwards, vowed to make his state "as wet as the Atlantic Ocean." But on Jan. 16, 1920, Prohibition became law of the land as the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. New Jersey was one of only three states not to ratify the amendment, but the feds made it clear they would enforce the law.

Trenton's saloons were left with a tough decision , The could close down, convert to soda fountains or try to make a living selling 0.5 percent beer, stuff that was about as potent as sauerkraut. Or, perhaps, sell the hard stuff illegally - by going into business as speakeasies.

You didn't need to be that secretive to sell drinks on the sly. All you needed was the cooperation of the police department, which saw nothing wrong with the booze trade and turned a blind eye to all but the most flagrant violators.

It helped that the police chief was William Walter, an agreeable fellow who was on the take and whose best friend was Victor Cooper, the "beer baron" of Trenton.

Speakeasies flourished everywhere where thirsty working people lived. By Walter's own admission, there were at least 800 of them - four times the number of legal, pre Prohibition watering holes. Richard Switlik, now president of Switlik Parachute Co., remembers one bustling place at South Broad and Bridge streets, where music and hilarity blared. Another speakeasy, popular with Paul Whiteman's jazz band, operated on Chancery Lane - across the street from the police station.

Idle factories were put to use as illegal distilleries. At the rail yards, cargo holds labeled "Jersey tomatoes" or "produce" were really carrying a different type of commodity.

It was still legal to buy alcohol with a doctor's prescription, which allowed the city's Municipal Colony hospital to stockpile gin and whiskey. Records would later show vast amounts of the stuff being prescribed to "patients" who were quite dead. A city commissioner was tried and acquitted on embezzlement charges.

There was also home brewing. 'Burg native Maurice Perilli, now president of Roma Federal Savings Bank, helped his family cook malt in a jug and siphon it into bottles. "Once the yeast settled, it was pretty good beer," Perilli said. "Of course, my dad always diluted it for me so it wasn't much more than water."

To get an idea of how nutty the times were, consider these news items from a single year in the Prohibition era, 1926:

\* Federal agents, keeping a close watch on moonshine and applejack in the Pine Barrens, said they would follow up every sighting of the Jersey Devil and find out what the witnesses had been drinking.

\* Hard-drinking 17-year-old Margaret Denston earned the nickname of the "Flapper Bandit" for holding up a Camden saloon.

\* All charges were dropped against a dozen rum-runners caught red-handed unloading whiskey from a camouflaged barge in the Rancocas Creek. Prosecutors said there was a lack of evidence.

\* A Jersey City bartender arrested for selling whiskey to an undercover dry agent asked to go free because the cop tricked him by saying he needed the drink to help his indigestion. A federal judge in Trenton laughed and fined the barkeep \$200.

\* Thousands of bottles, flasks and kegs of booze, accumulated over the years in various seizures, were finally smashed to pieces in the basement of the Mercer County Courthouse -- sending a strong odor of alcohol wafting through the halls of justice.

By year's end, there were a mere 19 dry agents and administrators doing the entire work of Prohibition in New Jersey. It was impossible even to bring to court all 2,117 cases lodged in 1926 against bootleggers and liquor dealers.

Enter Ira Reeves, the Prohibition chief who was supposed to clean up this mess. One of his first actions after he took charge that November was to ask for the resignation of the ineffective Mercer County dry administrator. Another was to concentrate on raiding giant stills and big shipments of drinks, not padlocking the small-time speakeasies.

At a party, Reeves was taunted by a friend who openly drank what he thought was authentic Black Horse Ale. Subsequently, on a raid on a Jersey farm, Reeves found a pile of Counterfeit "Black Horse Ale" labels along with a vat of beer with a dead rat floating on top. He sent both the labels and rat to his friend.

Mostly, however, Reeves encountered only frustration. The Coast Guard obstructed him from nabbing the speedy skiffs running rum off the Jersey Shore. Local police departments refused their cooperation.

On the night of Jan. 20, 1927, Reeves dispatched three of his best men to check out a report of a beer warehouse at Market and Broad streets in Trenton.

The dry agents had no sooner showed up when a mob of angry citizens surrounded them outside the warehouse and threatened to beat them up. One of the agents fired into the air to disperse the crowd; that alerted a nearby patrol cop.

The cop's reaction was immediate: to arrest the federal agents for carrying guns without licenses!

"If Col. Reeves can employ none other than gun-toting operatives, he had better keep them in

Newark," Chief Walter went on to explain. "We don't want them here."

Frustrated, Reeves quit four months later and wrote a memoir, Ol' Rum River, blasting the whole Prohibition movement.

Soon, it became clear even to the most ardent dry crusader that Prohibition was a flop. Worse than that, it was handing control of the Jersey liquor trade to shady gangsters like "Legs" Diamond and Dutch Schultz, and small-time, homicidal hoods like Trenton's "Little Joe" Marrazzo and Joe Pantieri.

On Sept. 26, 1929, Marrazzo and Pantieri ambushed a truck full of bootleg liquor and shot two rivals to death at Lyndale and Enimett avenues. The duo went to the electric chair for their crime, snarling defiance all the way. "Let's go, boys, let's go," Marrazzo said, smoking a cigar on his way to the death seat.

More Prohibition violence would follow. In 1930, a 19-year-old bootlegger was shot-gunned to death in a battle with a rival gang in Hamilton. In 1931 came the worst atrocity of all -- a bomb went off at a distillery in Lawrence, killing a neighbor, injuring five dry agents who were inspecting the place, and sending the township police chief to the hospital for months.

Prohibition came to an end with repeal of the 18th Amendment on Dec. 5, 1933. Toasts were drunk once again in the open, wine was sold in the groceries, and real beer replaced near beer. The governor, A. Harry Moore, vetoed a bill for alcohol beverage control, which delayed legal liquor for a few days. Not to worry, he told everyone.

"Liquor has been sold illegally for 13 years in New Jersey," Moore said, "and it will not hurt if this is done for a few days more."

# 1934: The top cop is 'king of rackets'

By JON BLACKWELL / The Trentonian <http://www.capitalcentury.com/1934.html>

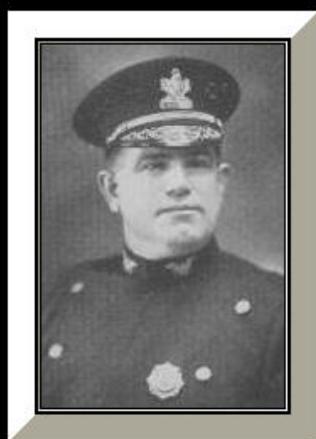
The fix was in. Didn't the cops know that? Yet here they were, busting one of Trenton's biggest illegal booze distilleries, hauling the hoods and wiseguys down to the station and seizing \$30,000 in bootleg liquor.

It was Sept. 22, 1930, in the middle of the Prohibition era, and the giant hooch plant behind the bricked-over windows of the old Globe Rubber Co. plant at Prospect and Frazier streets was so brazen, with trucks rumbling in at all hours of the night, that it practically invited a police raid.

When Lt. John Kelly led his lawmen into the place, however, he came upon a shady man in the front office named Cooper who assured him that it was all a mistake.

"We have the OK on this place," the man kept saying.

Then, an offer: How about \$5,000 if you and your men leave now, no questions asked? No? How about \$10,000?



**Chief William P. Walter**

*(1929 photo)*

Appointed as a Patrolman on June 29, 1904, Walter ascended the ranks and was promoted to the rank of Chief on August 26, 1925.

Kelly had heard plenty of desperate men pleading that the fix was in, and this sounded equally desperate. Naturally he ignored this one.

What Kelly didn't know, however, was that the fix really was in.

The 11 men arrested at the Globe Rubber plant walked out of police headquarters without being booked or fingerprinted. Even their rum-running trucks got returned.

In 1934, the incident at the Globe Rubber plant would help touch off the Trenton Police Department's worst corruption scandal, ripping the cover off underworld ties to law enforcement and eventually sending the chief of police and his racket squad sergeant to prison.

When he first became police chief in 1925, however, Chief William Walter was untouchable.

Bluff and burly, Walter had risen in the ranks over 25 years from beat cop to sergeant to

lieutenant to captain to chief. He was streetwise, knowing every squealer, pimp and two-bit hustler in town. He had the loyalty of his officers and the respect of the City Commission.

Walter probably never thought there was anything particularly crooked about taking an occasional graft payment. Trenton was a workingman's town, with its share of illicit drinking and gambling. But that didn't hurt anyone.

For up to \$500 a week, as an investigation, later revealed, Walter would go easy on any of the gangsters who ran the booze and numbers rackets. But since they gave him their word they would avoid violence, that didn't hurt anyone either, did it?

Dozens of sports, swells, toughs and gamblers were probably in on the action with the chief's blessing. John Arbitel, an ex-boxer who once gave his occupation as "professional gambler," controlled much of Trenton's bootlegging. Harry "Muggsy" Rednor had numbers operations in every ward. Dapper, bespectacled, but vicious Jeff Taylor ran the city's laundry "protection" rackets.

Biggest of them all, in physical heft and in power, was Victor Cooper, the beefy "beer baron" of Trenton.

Cooper owned a network of stills and booze warehouses in the West Ward, but always avoided prosecution with the money and friendship he gave Walter. (Whether he was the same Cooper who tried to bribe Lt. Kelly was never explained.)

When federal dry agents tried to scope out a suspected beer warehouse at Market and Broad streets in 1927; Walter had the agents arrested. The city thought it was hilarious. As long as Prohibition was in effect, and the times were prosperous, an easygoing chief like Walter could go ahead and not enforce the law.

But the Great Depression brought grim times to town and less tolerance for shenanigans.

On Oct. 24, 1932, a truck crammed with bottles of Canadian whiskey was ambushed with gunshots as it rolled down the Bordentown-Trenton Road. From the shadows emerged two Chambersburg hoodlums, Michael "Daylight" Tramantana and "Ponzi" Cammarata, who proceeded to dump the driver's dead body out of the cab and hijack the shipment. They had barely moved before Burlington County lawmen grabbed them.

The same night, John Arbitel made a curious pilgrimage to the homes of three cops in Trenton, including the head of the city dry squad. Arbitel later explained: "I was only interested in telling (the police) that I was trying to get these boys to go straight."

The smell of fishiness grew stronger when Lt. Kelly abruptly quit his job that November. To the Trenton Evening Times he then confided a list of shocking charges that, if true, would expose the chief as a crook bigger than any bootlegger.

Kelly told the full story of the Globe raid. He told how Walter ordered all of the prisoners

released and pulled the officers off the premises. When Kelly protested, the chief allegedly told him: "Give them a break."

Kelly went further with his allegations. It was a common practice, he said, for police to tip off speakeasies or gambling joints before raids. Certain gangsters were not to be arrested. For appearance's sake, number-runners could be briefly jailed, but their tickets had to be returned to the policy bank, lest lottery players lose money.

The Times crusaded for a cleanup in the police department. Its reporters discovered that Walter had his own insurance brokerage, and had tried to buy a life insurance policy for Victor Cooper. "What is back of it all?" the paper asked, over and over.

Mayor George LaBarre had just assumed the city's highest office after 30 years in politics. He responded to the scandal in the time-honored way politicians do when the status quo is threatened. He attacked the media.

"Ridiculous," he called the charges. "Malicious." "False." Walter's response was even weirder. There were no payoffs or graft payments to police, he insisted. If there had been, his friend Cooper would have told him.

A grand jury heard Kelly's charges, but no one else in Trenton was going to back the accuser. Taylor and Rednor, suspected of being part of the graft ring, denied ever making payments to police. So the investigation into the chief's affairs languished.

In December 1933, however, Prohibition was finally repealed, making it legal to sell beer again. The City Commission decided in February 1934 that it would grant no more than 250 liquor licenses. But since more than 800 speakeasies were in business - by Walter's own admission - hundreds of watering holes faced extinction.

Their owners, angry and desperate, began to complain openly that they had paid hundreds of dollars in protection money to stay open.

Prosecutors were, meanwhile, closing in on Taylor and Rednor. On trial for lobbing a bomb at an East Hanover Street laundry, Taylor fingered Walter as the man who allowed him to operate with impunity in Trenton.

Meanwhile, Walter had hiked his own fees from \$350 to \$500 to allow Rednor to keep running his North Clinton Avenue bar and betting parlor. Rednor refused and found himself under arrest. So he turned rat, too, along with two other gangsters, bootlegger Louis Alexander and numbers syndicate chief "New York Mike" Warasky.

Rednor was now ready to change his story as he testified before a new grand jury. He claimed it was standard procedure for him to walk into the police station through a private entrance and meet with Walter in the chief's office, to discuss graft. Sgt. William Marren, the rackets squad boss who served as the chief's right-hand man, would then collect the cash.

To back up his story, Rednor had Walter's unlisted phone number, and witnesses remembered him delivering a case of champagne to the chief's North Willow Street home as a wedding anniversary present.

Mayor LaBarre suspended Walter and Marren from the police department on Aug. 27, 1934, while he held his own hearing into the scandal. To no one's surprise, LaBarre found the duo innocent, since the gangsters making the accusations were "known perjurers."

But in January 1935, a grand jury handed up its own indictments. Walter, 54, and Marren, 44, were charged with malfeasance in office. To convict, prosecutors had only to show that the men had known about lawbreaking in the city and failed to do anything about it.

The chief's defense counsel tried to make it a case of the cop's word against that of known gangsters. But Prosecutor Leo Rogers had a surprise witness, a reputable doctor named Robert Phillips who lived on West State Street.

Phillips remembered the chief having a strange nighttime conference on the curb in front of his office. As the courtroom held its breath, the physician was asked to identify, the man the chief was with. He pointed straight at "Muggsy" Rednor.

In his closing argument, the prosecutor used all his powers of oratory against the chief and the sergeant.

"There sit Public Enemy No. 1 of Trenton, the king of racketeers, and his chief beheader," Rogers thundered.

The jury took 4 1/2 hours to deliver its verdict -- guilty.

As punishment, Walter and Marren each got two-year sentences at New Jersey State Prison. LaBarre's own punishment was not long in coming -- the same day as the guilty verdict, Trenton voters approved a referendum to set up a new City Council form of government. When the council was sworn in later that year, LaBarre was out as mayor.

If the chief had any consolation, it was that Trenton does not hold a grudge. When he died in 1957, at age 77, the Trenton Times ran an obituary detailing his long service as a lawman. It never mentioned his conviction.



**Chief William A. Dooling**

Appointed as a Patrolman on August 2, 1915, and after 2 years of service Dooling was drafted into the Army and fought in WWI. Returning from his military service in 1919, Dooling was promoted to Sergeant in 1920 and ascended the ranks. On September 1, 1937, he was promoted to Chief.